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ABSTRACT

Geography helps one understand the physical and cultural characteristics of the world. Geographic education provides the values, knowledge, concepts, and skills to better understand ourselves, our relationship to the earth, and our interdependence with other peoples of the world. There is a great need to increase the quantity and quality of geographic education in elementary schools to overcome ignorance of geography. Place names and locations are stressed in elementary geography, as are map and globe skills and the recognition of physical landforms appearing on maps. Teachers promote the study of geography through one or more teaching strategies: personal experiences, textbooks and printed media, and interactive computer software. Most geography is taught as a part of social studies and only a small portion of the day is spent in the study of these subjects. As a result, students' concepts of geography are severely limited and sometimes non-existent. The Guidelines for Geographic Education provide help in the selection of objectives and organization of geographic knowledge for elementary students. Five geographic themes are recommended for study by students at all levels: location, place, human and environment relationships, movement, and regions. Geography instruction is necessary in elementary schools. Geographers, geographic resources, and teachers must meet at state and district-level workshops to improve instruction. Emphasis must be placed upon understanding the context and importance of the five major themes of geographic education. Teachers must be taught to emphasize questioning, analyzing, verifying, and evaluating geographic information. A 10-item bibliography is included. (GEA)

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TEACHING GEOGRAPHY IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By Mary E. Haas

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Teaching Geography in the Elementary School

by Mary E. Haas

Although geography has long been a part of the elementary curriculum, today there is a renewed interest in teaching the subject. Particularly significant is the large public response to the essay "Geographic Ignorance: Time for a Turnaround" written in 1985 by Gilbert Grosvenor, President of the National Geographic Society. Also, Geographic Awareness Week was instituted by an act of Congress in 1987 to draw attention to the need to improve geographic literacy in the United States. Furthermore, a recent survey of states and territories reports that 93 percent of their schools will increase emphasis on geography at the elementary level within the next five years (CCSSO 1988). This ERIC Digest discusses (1) reasons for teaching geography in elementary schools, (2) how geography is taught, (3) major deficiencies in the teaching and learning of geography, and (4) how to improve geographic education in elementary schools.

Why Should Geography Be Taught in the Elementary School? Geography helps one understand the physical and cultural characteristics of the world. Geographic education provides the values, knowledge, concepts, and skills to better understand ourselves, our relationship to the earth, and our interdependence with other peoples of the world. The locational organization scheme of geography provides a framework for learning the physical, social, and historical phenomena studied in both elementary and secondary schools.

Formal instruction in the primary and elementary grades is effective in increasing geographic knowledge and skills (Buggy & Kracht 1986). Elementary students have the abilities to learn geographic skills in observation, classification, organization, and map reading and interpretation. Elementary school students also have measurable attitudes concerning people in other nations and are interested in and able to learn about people in other areas of the world (Mitsakos 1976; Pike & Barrows 1976). These attitudes often develop, however, without accurate knowledge of the locations and characteristics of places and the people who live in them. There is a great need to increase the quantity and quality of geographic education in elementary schools to overcome ignorance of geography.

How is Geography Taught in the Elementary School? Place names and locations are stressed in geography in the elementary grades, as are map and globe skills and the recognition of physical landforms appearing on maps. Teachers promote the study of geography through one or more teaching strategies: personal experiences, textbooks and printed media, and interactive computer software.

Personal experiences begin with children interacting with their own environment. Children begin by recording their observations from walks and fieldtrips in essays, pictures, or simple maps. Children decide what is important to show on their maps and what symbols to use. At first children show things rather crudely, using sequence, approximate size, and location. Interactive formal instruction in the cardinal directions begins by learning left and right and locating north through observations of the movement of the sun. By interacting directly with people from other places or vicariously through stories and pictures, children begin to recognize both the common and unique attributes of more distant locations. They offer explanations for locations and differences in the environment. Such interactions result in descriptions and definitions of places.

Textbook series in social studies introduce geographic instruction in grades 1 and 2 and emphasize geographic study in grades 3 and 4. Throughout the elementary grades the identification of map and globe terms, use of the compass to find directions, computation of distance, collection of information, and making of inferences, predictions, and drawing conclusions are the map and globe skills emphasized in the textbooks. In textbooks the learning of map skills begins in the first or second grade with the introduction of a picture of the earth. Children are asked to distinguish the shape of the earth and the differences between the land and the water. The first maps in the textbooks are of classrooms and familiar locations, such as shopping centers. Children learn map skills related to the uses of symbols, the legend, and cardinal directions. Children begin studying scale in the third grade and grid systems in grade 4.

Small scale political maps of the United States begin to appear in textbooks as early as second grade. By the fourth grade the texts include many physical and cultural maps, both within the text and in atlas sections. The supplementary materials accompanying textbook series for all grades include practice sheets for map skills, outline maps, questions, and paper-and-pencil puzzles which teachers may use.

In addition to concentrating on the location theme of geography through map study, elementary geography currently places emphasis on learning the physical and human characteristics of places. In third grade rural and urban communities are investigated, while in fourth grade emphasis is on climatic and physical regions of the world and their natural resources. Therefore, such concepts as mountain, river, plain, continent, equator, suburb, transportation, community, and lake appear most frequently in the textbook series (Haas 1988).

What Are the Major Deficiencies in the Teaching and Learning of Geography in Elementary Schools? Many geographers are

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disturbed by the fact that when geography is taught in elementary schools, students are not told they are studying geography. Therefore, their concept of geography is severely limited and sometimes non-existent. Many students and teachers associate geography only with the study of map skills.

Most geography is taught as a part of social studies and, to a lesser degree, in science. Only a small portion of the school day is spent in the study of these subjects. Teachers are often concerned with the shortage of time to teach what they perceive as more important subjects, and when they do teach geography feel pressed to cover material in textbooks and curriculum guides rather than to work toward comprehension (Thornton & Wenger 1989).

In 1984 the National Council for Geographic Education and the Association of American Geographers took a major step toward helping to improve the organization of the geographic curriculum with the publication of GUIDELINES FOR GEOGRAPHIC EDUCATION. These guidelines provide help in the selection of objectives and organization of geographic knowledge for elementary students. Five themes of geography are recommended for study by students at all levels: location, place, human and environment relationships, movement, and regions.

Location and place currently receive most emphasis in the elementary grades. Often such an emphasis results in students trying to memorize information in isolation rather than trying to analyze relationships. The printed media fail to systematically group or carefully define geographic concepts. Organization and repetition to assist students in learning and retention of key ideas, such as the spiral curriculum and concept clustering, are lacking in most elementary textbook series (Haas 1988).

First graders are aware of a wide variety of physical geographic concepts through travel and the media, but these children still tend to have many misconceptions and errors concerning the criterial attributes of geographic concepts. For example, students may say that a volcano explodes yet they are unable to identify a volcano in a picture and may not be able to name landforms found near their own residences. However, experimental studies with primary and elementary children indicate that students can learn geography when taught by well-prepared teachers and carefully sequenced instruction (Buggey & Kracht 1986).

How Can Geographic Education in the Elementary Grades Be Improved? In November 1988 the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) surveyed forty-one states and territories concerning geographic education. All forty-one indicated that instruction in geography is required in the elementary schools. Those responding said that the CCSSO should concern itself with developing new curricula in geography and suggested that bringing together geographers, geographic resources, and teachers in workshops at the state and individual district level is the best way to improve geographic instruction.

State-level geographic alliances, state departments of education, private corporations, and the National Geographic Society have collaborated to provide workshops for teachers throughout the United States. These efforts need to continue and to involve elementary teachers.

The emphasis in such workshops needs to be placed upon understanding the content and importance of the five major themes of geographic education at all grade levels and upon how geographers analyze cultural as well as physical data. Teachers need to be taught how to go beyond memorization with children and emphasize questioning, analyzing, verifying, and evaluating geographic information. The role of decision making about the environment also needs to be considered in both historical and current situations.

The selection of meaningful objectives for elementary students, the organization of geographic knowledge, and the appropriate teaching methods to use with young learners are keys to improving instruction and preparing new curricula. All of these goals need to be emphasized concurrently with those who are preparing to become teachers.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 1900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304; telephone numbers are 703-823-0500 and 800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

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